



# **According To His Abilities**

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'Just look at that gun barrel—big enough to poke your finger into,' Aram Briggs said, and did just that. With an unconsciously lascivious motion he pushed the end of his grimy middle finger into the muzzle of the bulky hand gun and rotated it slowly. 'Throws a slug big enough to stop any animal dead, hydrostatic shock, or if you use explosive slugs it can blow down a tree, a wall.'

'I should think the recoil would break one's wrist the first time it was fired,' Dr DeWitt remarked with unconcealed animosity, peering nearsightedly at the gun as though it were a snake preparing to strike.

'Where have you been living, DeWitt—under a rock? Break nothing, the recoil on a gun this size would probably tear your whole hand right off if it wasn't damped. This is a 25 mm. recoilless. Instead of kicking back, the energy is what v/e call dissipated by going out slots. „ . . '

'Please spare me the inaccurate description of the principle of recoilless firearms; I know all I care to know on the subject. I would suggest you strap in before we start the braking descent'

'What's the matter doc, you getting nervous? That's not like you to snap like that.' Briggs' grin was more sadistic than sincere and DeWitt fought against the automatic feeling of distaste it produced in him.

'Sorry. Nerves I guess.' That grin again. 'But I cannot say I am used to this kind of mission nor pretending that landing on a planet full of hostiles is in any way attractive.'

"That's why I'm here, DeWitt, and you should be damned happy I am. You science boys get yourself into trouble so you have to call on somebody who isn't afraid of guns to come along and pull you out.' A buzzer sounded and a red light began an irritated blinking on the control board. 'You let Zarevski get himself all hung up and you can't get him out by yourselves. ...'

'They're going to drop this ship in sixty seconds, that was the warning to strap in.' DeWitt had of course seated himself as soon as they had left the parent ship for the small space-to-planet rocket, and carefully secured his straps. Now he glanced nervously from the large drifting shape of Briggs back to the flashing light. Briggs moved slowly, ignoring the warning, and DeWitt clenched his fists.

'Has the landing course been set' Briggs asked as he slowly settled the handgun into his holster and even more slowly pulled himself down into the chair. He was still tightening his belt when the rockets fired. The first decelerating blast kicked the air from their chests and stopped any conversation until they cut off again.

'Automatically programmed,' DeWitt gasped, painfully inhaling and waiting tremulously for the next blast. 'The computer will put us into the area over the village where they are holding Zarevski, but we will have to land the ship. I thought we would set down on a level spot near the river, you remember it from the maps, it's not too far from the village.'

'Crap. We land right in the middle of the town, they got that great damned square or football field there, whatever it is.'

'You can't do that!' DeWitt gasped, scarcely noticing a course-correction blast that pushed him into the resilient chair. 'The natives will be there, you'll kill them.'

'I doubt it. We'll come straight down with the hooter going, flashing the landing lights and hover a bit before the final drop, there won't be one of those creeps left within a kilometre when we finally touch down. Any stupid enough to stay will get cooked, and good riddance.'

'No—it's too dangerous.'

'Landing by the river is even worse. You want these tilings to think we're afraid of them or something? Land that far away and you'll never see Zarevski again. We land in the town!'

'You are not in control yet, Briggs. Not until we land. But perhaps you are right about the river....'

'You know damn well I am!'

DeWitt went on, ignoring the interruption. 'I can think of other reasons why it won't do to be too far away. Yet your landing inside the city is just as bad. We can't guarantee that some of them won't be caught in the landing blast, and that must be avoided at all costs. I think, if you look there on your map, grid 17-L, you'll see an area that will make a good compromise. It borders on the village and seems to contain a crop of some kind. And none of the photographs show any natives in the field.'

'All right, good enough. If we can't cook them we'll cook their corn on the cob.' His laugh was so short and throaty it sounded like a belch of disgust. 'Either way we'll throw a fright into them and let them know just what the hell we think and just why the hell they can't get away with this.'

DeWitt nodded reluctantly. 'Yes, of course. You probably know best.' Briggs did know best, that was why he would run the operation on the ground, and he, Dr Price DeWitt, with the myopic eyes and slightly rounded shoulders of a man who was more at home in a laboratory than an alien jungle, would be the second in command. It was not an easy thing to take orders from a man like Briggs, but it had been the decision of the Board and he had concurred.

Sending two men was a calculated risk, with the odds carefully

determined by computer to be well weighted in favour of success. The only other alternative was a small-scale invasion by the military with no guarantee that then objective would be obtained. There would be few, or no, losses among the ranks of the invaders, but a number of natives would be killed and Zarevski would probably be assassinated before they could reach him. If this wasn't argument enough, Spatial Survey was morally and constitutionally opposed to violence against alien races. They would risk the lives of two men, two armed men who would only fight in self defence, and that was all. Aram Briggs and Price DeWitt had been the two men chosen.

'What's it really like down there?' Briggs asked suddenly and for the first time the rasp of automatic authority was missing from his voice.

'Cold, a kind of particularly damp and nasty autumn that goes on for ever.' DeWitt worked hard not to show any of his natural feelings of pleasure at the light deflation of his companion's arrogance. 'This planet is a cold one and the natives stay near the equator. I suppose they find it comfortable, but on the first expedition we never seemed to be able to get warm.'

'You speak their language?'

'Of course, that's why I'm comic g, I'm sure they briefed you about that. We all learned it, it's simple enough. We had to if we wanted to work with the natives since they absolutely refused to learn a word of ours.'

'Why do you keep calling them natives,' Briggs asked with a sly smile, looking at DeWitt out of the corners of his eyes. 'They have a name don't they? The planet must have a name?'

'It has an identification number, D2-593-4. You know Spatial policy on assigning names.'

'But you must have had a nickname for the natives, you must have called them something. . .?'

'Don't try to be coy, Briggs, it doesn't become you. You know perfectly well that a lot of the men called the natives "creeps", just as you well knew I don't use the name myself.'

Briggs barked a short laugh. 'Sure, doc. Creeps. I promise not to use the word creeps in front of you—even if they are creeps.'

He laughed again but DeWitt didn't respond, sunk in his own thoughts, wondering for the thousandth time if there was any possibility of this rescue plan succeeding. Zarevski had been refused permission to visit this planet, had come in spite of this and had done something to anger the natives and had been captured. In the days that had passed since he had sent his last radio message he might have been killed. In spite of this it had been decided that a rescue attempt would be made. DeWitt felt a natural jealousy at this, that a xenologist

could become so important that he could break all the rules and still be valued for his genius. DeWitt's own career of over ten years in the Spatial Survey was unmarked by anything other than a slow rise in position and an annual increase in salary. Pulling the eccentric Zarevski out of this self-made trap would probably be the most important entry in his record—if it could be done. And that was up to Briggs, the specialist, the man with the right abilities. A strident buzzer burst through his thoughts.

'The alarm, we are over the target area. I'll take control of the ship and land it... '

'And as soon as we touch down I'm in charge.'

'You're in charge.' It sounded very much like a sigh the way DeWitt said it and he wondered again if there could be any sense to this plan.

Though DeWitt was theoretically flying the ship, he did little more than point to a spot and tell the computer to land on it. It was the computer that monitored the approach, measuring the multiple forces involved, cancelling them precisely with, blasts from the jets. Once the final descent began all DeWitt did was watch the ground below to be sure none of the natives would be caught by the landing. The instant they touched down safely and the roar of the engines died away Briggs was on his feet.

'Let's go, let's go,' he ordered in his strident voice. 'Grab that box of trade supplies and I'll show you how to get Zarevski away from the creeps.'

DeWitt made no comment nor did he show his feelings in any way. He simply put the strap of the heavy box over his shoulder and struggled the weight of it towards the airlock. While the lock was cycling them out he zipped up the front of his heated coverall and turned on the power. When the outer door cracked open a keening wind thrust a handful of brown and strangely shaped leaves into the compartment, bringing with it the pungent, alien smell of the planet. As soon as it had opened wide enough Briggs pushed through and jumped to the ground. He turned slowly in a complete circle, gun ready in his hand, before grunting with satisfaction and shoving it back into the holster.

'You can come down now, DeWitt. None of them in sight.'

He made no attempt to help the smaller man, only grinning with barely concealed contempt as DeWitt lowered the box by its strap, then jumped down clumsily after it.

'Now let's go get Zarevski,' Briggs said, and stamped away towards the village. DeWitt trailed after.

Because he had twisted sideways to straighten the strap over his shoulder, DeWitt caught sight of the three natives a moment before

Briggs did. They appeared suddenly from a stand of yew-like trees and stared at the new arrivals. Briggs, who was constantly turning his head to watch on all sides, saw them a moment later. He wheeled, dropped, drawing his gun at the same time, and when he was lying flat on the ground he pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The natives dropped just then.

DeWitt didn't move, though he hid to control a sudden shiver that trembled his body. From his belt hung a small metal box with control studs on its surface; it looked like a radio-intercom, but it wasn't. He had his finger pressed on one of the buttons, and he didn't let up until Briggs had stopped pulling the trigger and began to examine the gun with horrified eyes.

'It didn't go off But why?'

'Probably the cold. Contracted the parts,' DeWitt said hurriedly glancing from the prone man to the natives who were slowly climbing to their feet. 'I'm sure it will be all right the next time you need it. And it was a good thing that you didn't shoot. They weren't attacking, or trying to get close to us, just looking.'

'They better not try any funny business with me,' Briggs said, climbing to his feet and holstering his gun, though keeping his hand on the butt. 'They're ugly ones, aren't they?'

By any human standards the aborigines of planet D2-593-4 could not have been called attractive. They resembled men only in rough outline of body, head, and paired arms and legs on a thin torso. Their skin appeared to be covered with hairy scales: fish-like brown scales the size of a man's hand whose lower edge shredded into a fringe of furlike substance. Either they were moulting, or the random nature of scale arrangement was natural, because here and there on the bodies of all of them patches of scales were missing and areas of raw looking, orange skin shone through. They wore no clothes, only strings supporting containers and crude weapons, and the scales continued irregularly over all parts of their bodies. Their heads were perhaps their most repulsive aspect, covered with slashed and wrinkled orange skin. Both men knew that quivering slashes covered olfactory and auditory organs, yet the resemblance to mortal knife wounds was still disconcerting. The tiny eyes peered malevolently from another transverse slit situated near the top of the skull. DeWitt had spent more than a terran year on this planet and still found the sight of them repellent.

'Tell them not to come any closer,' Briggs ordered. He seemed unperturbed by their appearance.

'*Stop where you are,*' DeWitt said in their language.

They stopped instantly and the one on the right, with the most weapons, hissed through a mouth slit. '*You speak our language.*'

DeWitt started to answer, then restrained himself. It was a statement, not a question, and he was under strict orders to volunteer nothing. He was to act as much like a translating machine as possible since this was Briggs' show. Before he could translate the opening remark, the native went on.

*'How is it that you speak our language? Does this other one talk too?'*

'What is it jabbering about?' Briggs demanded, and snorted in anger when DeWitt had translated. 'Just tell him that your job is translating and I got no time to waste on that kind of stuff, and tell them we want Zarevski.'

This was a test of theory, and DeWitt took a deep breath before he answered. He put an effort into attempting to translate as exactly as possible and was surprised when they took no umbrage at the insulting tone of the words, in face even bobbed their heads from side to side slightly in the local gesture of agreement.

*'Where did you learn our language?'* The leader asked DeWitt, who translated the question for Briggs before he answered.

*'On this planet. I was here with the first expedition'*

Briggs was laughing. 'I bet they didn't recognize you, probably think all humans look alike—bet they even think *we* are ugly!' The smile vanished as quickly as it had arrived. 'Stop the horsing around. We came for Zarevski and that's all we care about. Tell them that.'

DeWitt did, having difficulty only with "horsing around" though he managed to get the meaning across.

*'Come with me,'* the leader said turning and walking towards the village. His companions went with him, but Briggs put a restraining hand on DeWitt's shoulder.

'Let them get a bit ahead, I want to keep my eyes open for any tricks. And we don't want to do just what he says or he'll think he can push us around. All right, we can go now.'

At a respectable distance, as though they just happened to be strolling in the same direction by coincidence, the two parties straggled into the village. None of the inhabitants were in sight, though smoke rose from holes at the peak of most of the angled wattle and daub houses. The sensation of unseen eyes watching from their deep interiors was intense.

*'In there,'* the alien called back over his shoulder, at the same time jerking his many-fingered hand at a building no different than all the others.

The aliens kept walking on, without looking back, and Briggs stopped, quizzically watching «hem go. Only when they were out of sight did he turn and suspiciously examine the indicated building. It was perhaps five metres tall at the ridgepole and slanted straight to the ground on both sides. Narrow slits of windows let a certain



amount of light into it, and the flat front was pierced by a doorway the size and shape of an open coffin. It must have looked that way to DeWitt too, because his nose almost twitched with intensity as he examined the black opening.

'No way out of it,' Briggs finally said. 'We have to go in and that door is the only way. You go first and I'll keep my eyes open.'

The difference between the two men was proven then in the most obvious manner possible. DeWitt had some natural qualms about going through the door, but he forced them down, mumbled his memory through the various forms of greeting, and bent over to step inside. He had just thrust his head in through the doorway when Briggs grabbed him by the shoulder and threw him backwards onto the ground. He landed painfully on the end of his spine, the heavy box crashed into his leg, and looked up in amazement at the thick spear sticking in the ground and still vibrating with the force of impact. It had penetrated deep into the earth in the exact spot where he had been.

'Well, that shows one thing,' Briggs exulted, pulling the dazed DeWitt to his feet. 'We've found the right place. This job is going to be a lot shorter and easier than I thought.' With one heavy boot he kicked the spear out of his way, bent under the door and stalked into the building. DeWitt stumbled after him.

Blinking in the smoke-laden air they could dimly see a group of natives at the far end of the room. Without looking around Briggs stalked towards them. DeWitt followed, stopping just long enough to examine the mechanism fixed over the door. Enough light penetrated from the slit windows so that he could just make it out: a frame fixed to the wall that held a heavy wooden bow two metres long. A rope, running towards the group at the other end of the building, had released the simple trigger mechanism. No part of the trap was visible outside the door—yet Briggs had known about it.

'Get over here DeWitt,' the voice bellowed. 'I can't talk to these creeps without you! Come on!'

DeWitt hurried as fast as he could and dropped his heavy box in front of the five natives. Four of them stood in the background, hands on weapons, eyes that reflected the ruddy firelight gleamed malevolently from thinned slits. The fifth alien sat in front of them, on a box or platform of thick woven wood. A number of pendant weapons, bangles and oddly shaped containers, the local mark of high rank, were suspended from his body and limbs, and in both hands he balanced a long bladed weapon resembling a short sword with a thin blade.

'*Who are you?*' the alien asked, and DeWitt translated. 'Tell him we want to know his name first/ Briggs said, clearing his throat noisily

and spitting on the packed dirt floor.

After a short wait, during which his eyes never left Briggs, the seated alien said, '*B'deska.*'

'My name is Briggs and I'm here to get a man like me who is called Zarevski. And don't pull any more tricks like that thing at the door because you're allowed just one free shot with me and you've had it. Next time I kill somebody.'

*'You will eat with us.'*

'What the hell is he trying to pull, DeWitt? We can't eat the local grub.'

'You can if you want to, some of the xenologists did though I never had the nerve. There is nothing in it to cause anything worse than a bad heartburn, though I'm told the taste is loathsome beyond imagining. It is also an important social custom, no business is ever transacted except over a meal.'

'Bring on the chow,' Briggs said resignedly. 'I only hope this Zarevski is worth it'

One of the other aliens put down his weapon at a hissed word and went to a darkened corner of *the* building, bringing back a gourd with a wooden stopper and two cups of crudely fired clay. He placed the gourd on the ground and one of the cups before the visitor and the other in front of the seated chieftain. Briggs squatted on his haunches, and reaching out he took up both cups and raised them at arms' length.

'Great cups,' he said. 'Great workmanship. Tell him that. Tell him that these ugly pieces of mud are fine art and that I admire his taste.\*

DeWitt translated this, and while he did Briggs put the cups down again. Even DeWitt noticed that he had changed cups, so that each of them had the other's. B'deska said nothing, but pulled the plug from the gourd and filled his cup with dark liquid, then Briggs'.

'Oh God, that's horrible,' Briggs said, taking a small sip and shuddering. 'I hope the food is better.'

'It will be worse, but you only have to take a token mouthful or two.'

The same native who had brought the drink, now appeared with a large bowl brimming with a crumbled grey mixture whose very smell provoked nausea. B'deska tipped a handful of it into a suddenly gaping mouth slit, then pushed the bowl over to Briggs who scooped up as small a portion as was possible. DeWitt could see a tremor shake his back as he licked it from his fingers. No amount of coaxing by the alien could force him to take a second sample. B'deska waved the bowl away and two smaller bowls of food were brought. Briggs looked down at his on the floor before him and slowly rose to his feet.

'I warned you, B'deska,' he said.

Before DeWitt had finished translating this Briggs stamped on the bowl, crushing it, then ground the contents into the floor with his heel. The alien who had served the food was running towards the door and in sudden realization DeWitt grabbed for the control unit on his belt, but this time he was too slow. Before he could touch the radio control that would prevent Briggs' gun from firing the gun went off with a booming roar and the alien fell, a gaping hole in his back.

Briggs reholstered the gun calmly and turned back to B'deska who had raised his sword so that the point rested on the box next to him, but who otherwise had not moved.

'Now that that's out of the way, tell him I'm willing to talk business. Tell him I want Zarevski.'

'*Why do you want the man Zarevski?*' B'deska asked, his manner as unmoved as Briggs'. The dead alien lay crumpled, bleeding slowly into the dirt, and they both ignored him.

'I want him because he is my slave and he is very expensive and he ran away. I want him back and I want to beat him.'

'I can't say that,' DeWitt protested. 'If they thought Zarevski was a slave they might kill him. . . .'

His words were broken off as Briggs reached out and lashed him across the back of the face with his hand. It staggered him, bringing tears of pain to his eyes.

'Do what I tell you, you idiot,' Briggs shouted. 'You were the one who told me they kept slaves, and if they think Zarevski is a slave that will give them a chance to get a good price for releasing him. Don't you know that they think you are a slave too?'

De Witt had not realized it until that moment. He translated carefully. B'deska appeared to be thinking about this, though his eyes were on the box of trade goods all the time.

*'How much will you pay for him? He committed a bad crime and this will cost a lot.'*

'I'll pay a good price. Then I will take him and beat him, then bring him home and make him watch while I kill his son. Or maybe I will make him kill his son himself.'

B'deska bobbed his head in agreement when this was translated, and after that it was just a matter of bargaining. When the agreed number of brass rods and paste gems had been taken from the box B'deska climbed to his feet and left the room. The other aliens picked up the ransom payment and left after him. De Witt gaped after them.

'But—where is Zarevski?'

'In the box of course—where else did you think he would be? If he was valuable enough for us to come and get him B'deska wasn't going to allow him out of sight, or someone else would have made a deal with us. Didn't you see the way he had that pigsticker ready to

stab down into the box. One wrong move of ours and he would have put paid to Zarevski.'

'But wasn't your killing one of his men a wrong move?' DeWitt asked, tearing at the strings that sealed the box.

'Of course not. There was poison in that bowl, that was obvious. So I killed the slave just like I told him I would.'

The top came off and inside, gagged and trussed like a pig, was Zarevski. They cut away his bindings and rubbed the circulation back into his legs so that he could walk. DeWitt supported him with one arm and Briggs waved them towards the door.

'Go on first and I'll come behind with the box. I don't think there will be any trouble, but if there is any you know that I can take care of you—slaves!' He laughed uproariously, all by himself.

They stumbled slowly through the empty streets and Zarevski smiled back over his shoulder. A number of his teeth were missing and there were clotted cuts on his face, but he was alive.

'Thanks, Briggs. I heard the whole fling and couldn't say a word. You handled it perfectly. I made the mistake of trying to be friendly with these damn snakes, and you saw what happened to me. Someone I had talked to died, and they said I had killed him with the evil eye, then grabbed. I wish you had been with me.'

'That's okay, Zarevski, people make mistakes.\* His tone of voice left no doubt that he was one who never did. 'Only you better not talk any more until we're away from here. They saw you talking to me so you know what I have to do.'

'Yes, of course.\* Zarevski turned back, closing his eyes, wincing even before the blow landed. Briggs raised his foot and kicked him in the back, knocking him sprawling. He made no attempt to help when DeWitt once more dragged him to his feet.

Once they were near the ship Briggs walked up close to them.

'Not much more, then well all be out of this.'

'Are you in Spatial Survey?' Zarevski asked. 'I can't say I remember your name.\*

'No, this is just a temporary job.'

'You should make it permanent! The way you handled those natives—we can use men like you. Wouldn't you want to do that?\*

'Yes,' Briggs said, he was sweating in spite of the cold. 'It's not a bad idea. I could help you people.'

'I know you could. And there is plenty of room for advancement.\*

'Shut up, Zarevski! That's an order,' DeWitt broke in.

Zarevski dismissed him with a look and turned back to Briggs who was kneading his hands together with excitement.

'I could use an assistant like you on expeditions. I have enough men in the labs for writing up reports, but no one for field work. . . .'

'Be quiet, Zarevski!'

'... no one who really knows his way around like you do.'

'And do I!' Briggs shouted and threw his head back, tearing his fingers down his face, scratching the soft flesh. 'I can do it. I can do it better than anyone you know, better than anyone in the whole world. You're all against me but I can do it better. . . .'

'Briggs!' DeWitt shouted, turning and grabbing the man by both arms. 'Listen to me Briggs! Sunset-now! Do you hear me. . . sunset-now!'

With a tremulous sigh the big man closed his eyes and let his arms drop. DeWitt tried to hold him up but his weight was too great and he slumped to the ground. Zarevski looked on, dumbfounded.

'Come on, help me. You did this to him so you had better help carry him into the ship before B'deska and the rest of the locals see what has happened and come out after our skins.'

'I don't understand,' Zarevski said, helping to carry the dead weight to the ship, looking worriedly over his shoulder as the outer lock ground open. 'What's the matter with Mm?'

'Nothing now, before we left I planted the posthypnotic command with a key word just in case of trouble. He's asleep, that's all. Now we'll take him back to the hospital and try and put him back together. Everything considered he held up very well, and I would have got him back to the ship if you hadn't started your damn recruiting speech. Glory of Spatial Survey my foot!'

'What are you talking about?' Zarevski snapped.

Behind them the heavy door closed with a satisfying sound and DeWitt whirled to face the man they had rescued, anger finally burning through his control.

'Just who do you think Briggs is—a professional hero out of some historical novel that Spatial went out and hired? He is a sick man, right out of the hospital, and I'm his doctor—which is the only reason I'm here. One of the staff had to go with him, and I was the youngest so I volunteered.'

'What do you mean hospital?' Zarevski asked with a last attempt at bluster. 'The man's not sick. . . .'

'Mentally sick—and on the way to being cured until this happened. I hate to think how long it will set him back. Not as sick as some, he has almost a classic case of *paranoia simplex*, which is why we could use him. His delusions of persecution relate to his actual perception of his surroundings. So he was right at home down there. If you had read all the reports instead of blundering in you would have found out that those aliens have a society where a condition very much resembling paranoia is the norm. They feel that everyone is against them—and they are right. Everyone is. No sane person could

have been counted on to have the right reactions in such a society—we needed someone who suffered from the *same sickness*. The only thing I'm even remotely happy about in this whole mess is that it wasn't my decision to send Briggs down there. They decided that upstairs and I did the dirty work. I and Briggs.'

Zarevski looked down at the slack face of the man on the floor, breathing hard even though he was unconscious.

'I'm sorry ... I didn't . . .'

'You couldn't know.' Dr DeWitt was rigid with anger as he felt the fast, erratic pulse of his patient. 'But there is one thing you did know. You weren't supposed to land on that planet—but you did anyway.'

'That's none of your business.'

'Yes it is, just for now. Just for these few minutes before we go back to the ship and before I go back to my ward and they forget about me, with maybe a small commendation on my record, and you go back to being the great Zarevski and they put your name in the headlines. I helped pull you out of there which gives me the right to tell you one thing. You're a grandstander Zarevski and I hate your guts. I... oh what the hell ...'

He turned away and Zarevski opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind.

It was a short trip back to the waiting mother ship, and they didn't talk to each other because there was really nothing to say.